A Visual Exegesis for Preaching: Layering Stories and Scripture

by

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Date: ___4/26/2019___

Approved:

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry in the Divinity School of Duke University

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Abstract

This thesis will describe the way a story functions within a sermon as a layer of meaning placed over the biblical text that enhances a particular message from the Gospel. Stories allow the faithful to become active listeners as they unite their own stories to the one being told, creating a shared, lived experience. To demonstrate how the layering of stories function in a homily, I have created an art series of assemblages, visually illustrating how each layer focuses on certain textual details while discarding others. This visual exegesis highlights themes in the biblical text and illuminates the sermonic role of stories. It also provides an avenue for spiritual reflection, revealing similarities between my artistic process and my process of sermon preparation. The thesis is completed with a homily, synthesizing the elements described and sharing a message of hope from the scriptural account of the three young men in the fiery furnace (Daniel 3).
To Mary the Immaculate Conception,
the beautiful vessel that bore our Savior.
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List of Abbreviations

RSV  New Revised Standard Version
**Introduction**

A process must be followed in order to paint with oils. This process can be modified, but the risk of possible damage and lack of permanency increases exponentially. Occasionally, there is a story in the news media regarding the deterioration and attempted restoration of a famous painting. This is precisely because the appropriate steps were not implemented in its creation. It is not the deterioration of the paint, but rather, the canvas being destroyed by wet paint that has not sufficiently dried after many centuries. To prevent this from occurring, many layers are created using various mixtures of turpentine, oil, and varnish. First, there is a thin layer containing more turpentine than paint, which acts as a sketch. As each layer is added, paint, oil, and varnish are increased as the turpentine is slowly decreased. Colors become vibrant as paint is pushed around the landscape of the canvas. The final effect of this process adds to the brilliancy, shine, and luminosity that artists and viewers alike find pleasing. In addition, the process also adds to the work’s lifespan as the paint will dry sufficiently and not cause damage to the canvas.¹ This is simply the technical layering effect, but there is even more layering necessary in order to produce the final work.

Layers are not only important to paintings. All works of art have layers of meaning that are utilized in the creation of a visual story. Even a canvas that has been painted completely blue, devoid of all brushstrokes, is communicating something. Some messages are obvious, some hidden, while others are achieved by the mixing of meanings.

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¹ There are varying techniques and many additives an artist can use to create the finish they desire. For a detailed explanation see: Ralph Mayer, *The Artist’s Handbook of Materials and Techniques, Fifth Edition* (New York, New York: Viking Penguin, 1991), especially chapter 3.
being built upon one another. To take something out of one context and place it in an alternative context will tell a new tale. As the artwork tells a story, every minute detail is similar to a sentence uttered by a storyteller to a captive audience. With each stroke of the brush, the movement of images and the repetitive use of something familiar, all contribute to the overall visual and emotional effect of the work.

This use of layering in creating works of art, both technical and intellectual, functions to create the metaphor at the heart of this thesis. I will describe the way a story functions within a sermon as a layer of meaning placed over the biblical text that enhances a particular message from the Gospel. Stories can function as an effective medium, much like the oil and varnish used in oil painting, in illuminating a truth the preacher wishes to highlight and making it accessible to the listening assembly. As a Catholic priest and visual artist, I am fascinated by how the Gospel can be conveyed with the use of everyday stories, similar to the parables used by Jesus in his day. “With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them without a parable, but privately to his own disciples he explained everything (Mk. 3:33-34. RSV).” Jeffrey W. Frymire explains that Jesus was doing something much different than the Jewish religious leader of the time. “When Jesus spoke to the crowd,” Frymire explains, “he appealed not to the facts of the Jewish Scriptures but to the heart of God’s revelation in the Law and the Prophets and how that revelation appeared in everyday life.” Using familiar illustrations, metaphors, and examples from life-experience helps to facilitate the listener’s imagination, but they do more than this. This

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thesis will argue that stories, through their layers of meaning, analogy, and mixture of images, work to illumine the Gospel message of a particular text.

When I share the benefits of storytelling, I am concerned with stories in their most common form. I am not speaking about narrative preaching in general. Frymire gives us the most simple definition, “A story takes known facts and puts them into a form that we can effectively communicate to others.” These are the stories we relate to our friends when sharing something exciting that has occurred in our day, when we wish to make an impression, or to make another person laugh. These stories encourage others to tell their own stories that are similar. It then becomes a shared experience that keeps developing and taking on a life of its own. When stories are linked to the Gospel, they build up the body of Christ. A preacher who layers meaning through stories, by careful positioning and explication, presents the truth in a new, more tangible way. To make this comparison concrete, I will bring my homiletic process into conversation with the way I create visual art. This thesis is more than a theoretical discussion of the ways in which stories layer meaning upon a biblical text. It explores the concept through artistic praxis. The final homily which concludes this thesis is both influenced by and influential in the creation of a series of art assemblages which aid my discussion.

As a priest and artist, I believe the creation of both a homily and a work of art has a similar process. This thesis will be a working experiment to argue for this belief, and also a demonstration of how the Holy Spirit is present in faithful, artistic creation. Each

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4 Jeff W. Frymire, Preaching the Story, 27.
week, as I explore a particular biblical passage for a homily, I use examples and stories from my own life from which both my parishioners and I can learn. We come to an understanding of God’s message through a shared lived experience that is pondered, re-created, and exhibited for us all through the homily. Similarly, in the creation of a piece of art, I take a familiar image or painting, add new layers, highlighting or subtracting specific details of the original and creating something all-together new without destroying the old. This is key, as the original meaning is not to be forgotten, but is the fortifying layer on which everything else stands. The biblical text used as an example throughout this thesis will be the story of the three young men in the fiery furnace from the book of Daniel (Daniel 3). Using hermeneutical insights from this text to inform an original art series based on the painting “Pierrot,” by Antoine Watteau, I will demonstrate how the work of artistic layering functions homiletically. Reflecting on my own artistic process of layering images in response to the biblical text, I will describe how stories can highlight textual themes, how the work of visual exegesis enhances the process of sermon preparation, and how this artistic praxis mirrors the layering of story and scripture in the homily. Throughout the process of artistic and sermonic creation, I will note the guiding presence of the Holy Spirit.

For some years, there has been a concern that the use of our own stories in preaching will take away from the primary message of the Gospel. Richard Lischer is nervous when preachers insert stories in a piecemeal fashion without any reflection. He is not anti-story, but rather pro-story when it involves taking our stories and offering them back to the one story of God. In his book, “The End of Words,” Lischer makes it clear that the
telling of God’s story is a repetitious task. Yet, just because it is repetitious does not mean we should stop telling it and replace it with something fresh and entertaining. God’s story must be retold over and over again. When stories are told from the Bible, they are more than something to delight the ear. “They sustain. They do not inform, they form those who hear and share them for a life of faithfulness.” I often tell my assembly, God’s story is not here to make us feel good, but rather to make us good. It is transformative in nature to all who listen with an open heart and mind.

Lischer is suspect of preachers who simply replace the stories of the Bible in order to please the congregation. Doing this will be a disservice to the congregation. Even if a sermon relates a point and teaches on a particular topic, if not born from the fruit of the Spirit, it will not satisfy the infinite hole in all of our hearts. “Grace comes by art and art does not come easy because God is not clumsy.” The preacher is to suffer the weight of glory, immerse themselves in the fire of Truth, and come out with an experience worth telling. God is always in the fire with us, or rather, is the purifying fire that burns the truth onto the soul. “The preacher makes a small, shaped offering of truth back to the Truth itself. If you think of art as part discipline, part craft and part mystery, we may be on to something.” Preachers that take a lackadaisical approach, inserting canned illustrations or stories into the sermon without the hard work of suffering with the text,

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6 Ibid., 107.
7 Ibid., 108.
8 Ibid., 107.
may make something polished and nice, but will lack the depth needed for the conversion of hearts. In Lischer’s words:

The preacher’s task is not to tell bunches of substitute stories, which in the end only deflect our attention from the searing reality of the person before God, but to tell that one story, the one that precedes the general category of ‘story,’ and to tell it in such a way that it makes our stories permeable to it.

This thesis will describe how our stories, when touched by divine truth in the fire of love, do not subtract from God’s story, but rather brings both the preacher and the congregation closer to God. Our story becomes, not only permeable to God’s story, but one with it.

My exploration of how the artistic process of layering images clarifies the function of stories in preaching touches this larger question. Do stories, in conjunction with the biblical text, bring greater meaning to the Gospel message or subtract from God’s story?

The first chapter, or “layer,” of the thesis will be an exegesis of Daniel 3, focusing on the characters of the three young men in the fiery furnace. This scripture passage will ground my final homily, exploring the three young men’s response to persecution and suffering and how they use the praise of God as the source of their strength and protection. Most importantly, I will note God’s inbreaking “layer” in this text: the fourth figure in the furnace. The second chapter will be an exegesis of the painting “Pierrot” by Antoine Watteau, incorporating information about the painter himself. Watteau’s painting is what initially inspired my thoughts concerning the three men in the fiery furnace and their willingness to experience humiliation for God. My response to this painting, in light of

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9 Ibid., 109.
10 Ibid., 110.
Daniel 3, is the tinder that fuels the main thrust of the homily. In the third chapter, I will document my artistic, hermeneutic journey. I will visually explore how layers function in bringing out a particular meaning by stacking images upon one another, using various mediums and techniques to produce a series of assemblages around this subject. Each artistic response, by incorporating different layers, leads to a particular message. The series of assemblages become a visual lesson, describing how stories function when layered with scripture. They also provide an illustration of my own sermon construction journey. In bringing the creative art process into conversation with the creation of a homily, this crucial chapter notes a startling similarity. Both are born out of some type of suffering with God’s purifying presence to bring meaning. A Divine “layer” breaks in. The fourth chapter will be a homily utilizing a story born out of this experience to explain the truth contained within. It will make the claim that our personal stories, when made permeable to God’s Story, do not subtract anything from The Story. Rather, God unites our stories with God’s own to make them one. The painting and homily hold a similar truth but are told in different ways. My hope is that, in their comparison, more insight will be gained concerning what takes place every week in the pulpit, as the priest stands before his congregation and adds another layer to the ever-enlightening truth of the eternal Gospel.
Chapter 1: Exegesis of Daniel

Overview of the Book of Daniel

Anyone who has ever felt persecuted, denied, or humiliated should have some connection with the three young men in the furnace as depicted in Daniel 3. There have been many hard times in my own life that brought me into contact with this biblical text. The firm resolve of the three youths demonstrate an unwavering faith which I admire in my personal weakness. In the crucible of any type of suffering, they taught me to praise God rather than lose all hope. The lesson of this text will be expanded upon after a brief exegesis of the book of Daniel and a closer look of Daniel 3, which contains the story of these three young men. This is the foundational chapter on which the rest of my exploration is built. The story of the three young men should always be present in the back of the reader’s mind.

The many passages in the book of Daniel are wonderful stories in themselves. What is fascinating about the book of Daniel is that it transports the reader into a wholly different place in time, culture, and geography. We are placed into a new community different than our own, which is an important layer of understanding the truth of the passage. The reader’s imagination is set ablaze with visions never seen before as the details of each vignette take one to a far-off world. “Their is a world of kings and harems and eunuchs, of bawdy pagan rituals and drunken orgies, of bizarre methods of capital punishment involving fiery furnaces and pits full of lions, and strange experiences
with dreams and visions.”¹ This mysterious backdrop holds the reader’s attention as the stories relay an array of lessons and teachings which at first seem hidden. The uniqueness of these tales also aids in assisting in the reader’s retention since they engage the imagination so intensely.

The dating of the book of Daniel is hotly debated. Not only is there a clash in a historical sense, but in a theological sense as well. “The book of Daniel has been a battlefield between conservative and liberal scholars for years, and much of the controversy has had to do with the dating of the writing of the book.”² W. Sibley Towner believes it was written much later than what other scholars think for a number of reasons, but mostly because of its multiple languages. “The Book of Daniel contains the writings of several authors working at different times. The radically divergent content of the two halves of the book requires this thesis, as does the fact that the book is written in two languages.”³ Towner claims that the book is divided into two sections, with chapter 1-6 being one section and chapters 7-12 being the second, with each section written at different times by different authors. “In their essentials these tales are assumed to have come down from the third century B.C. or even somewhat earlier. The three apocalypses and the prayer-vision of Daniel 7-12, on the other hand, can be dated rather more precisely to the first third of the second century B.C.”⁴ In opposition, other scholars purport that the book of Daniel was composed by only one author.⁵ Also, the idea that

³ Towner,  Daniel: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, 5.
⁴ Ibid.
the use of two languages within one book presumes two authors is a weak and questionable argument at best. John C. Whitcomb purports, “It is true that two languages are used (Aramaic from 2:4 to 7:28, and Hebrew elsewhere); but they do not seem to constitute any kind of natural division for the book that would require two authors.” Whitcomb also dates the entire book of Daniel as being written much earlier than the second-century BC, citing that there would be many inaccuracies in its timeline compared to other historical writings. Louis F. Hartman and Alexander A. Di Lella explain what is really at the heart of this debate:

Thus on the one hand the so-called liberal has no right to sniff at the factual inaccuracies of the Book of Daniel, for it is unfair, not to say impious, to demand of ancient writers an awareness of the canons of nineteenth- and twentieth-century critical history in a book whose intent is essentially religious and not historical. But on the other hand, the so-called conservative also does the Word of God a huge disservice by insisting that the book does in fact deal with real persons and events of the seventh and sixth centuries B.C., as if the authors of Daniel intended to write history.

We see that those who reject the dating of the book to an earlier time are really fighting against the notion against supernatural foreknowledge. The other side of the camp believes in God’s supernatural power being able to break into humanity and human history to reveal future truths. Thus, there are those who believe the book to have been written much earlier. However, this thesis is not trying to argue for one side over the other to claim a victor. In fact, arguing these points do little to help with the main thrust of this thesis. Whether it was written by one author or many, earlier or later, does not

14.
6 Whitcomb, Daniel: Everyday Bible Commentary, 15.
7 Ibid., 16.
9 McGee, Daniel, viii.
make the book less coherent or relevant. However, it does say something about the particular community the author was writing to and for. It is important to see this layer as it changes the way one views the book. If written at an earlier date, the book is about remaining faithful because of God’s supernatural protection. It is a message of hope for what God is going to do, even if it means miracles will happen. If written at a later date, it still is a message of hope, but one that looks back on what God has done in the past. These mysteries and debates add to the many layers of the legend and meanings contained within. They also bring into view our own layers of tradition and history in the process of interpretation. Readers bring different meanings to each story as the reader active participants in the interpretive process.

From whatever angle viewed, the thrust of the book of Daniel is to admonish the reader regarding what it means to stay resolute in one’s faith. We are to trust God in good times and bad, and whether we are saved or not in this life, God still loves us. Either God’s presence manifests itself in our lives for the first time to give us a concrete experience of God’s love and care, or we are reminded of this experience to layer it on top of whatever crisis that is set before us in the present. The former is the foundation, while the latter is the layer placed upon the situation at hand to give hope when needed. It adds meaning to the particular moments of our lives. It is also the layer in which we view God’s word and what it means for us.

Those writing the book of Daniel were doing so to bring hope to their situation. Therefore, those who wrote the book of Daniel must have identified with the main characters and saw them as models to be emulated. “The authors of the book were
people who acted and thought like its heroes, Daniel and his three friends. In Daniel 1-6, these men incarnate the virtues of wisdom, piety, and trust. They are Torah-true Jews, noble illustrations of what unswerving loyalty to the covenant can mean.”

It is as if they are writing heroes into their history in order to have people of valor and courage be examples in bolstering their own resolve. Towner suggests that both the writers and readers would be the party in I Maccabees known as the Hasideans, a group that is different from the modern Jewish hasidics. “As a working hypothesis, then, consider the writer(s) of Daniel hasidim, spiritual ancestors of the Qumran community on the one hand, and the early Pharisees on the other.” It was these people that carried on the wisdom tradition, transmitting history to each generation by the stories they told. Good stories told of heroic figures in lessons to make people trust in God even in the midst of torment. “The wisdom circles of Israel carried on their didactic function by telling stories.” These are the very stories spread across the different books of the Bible that give our current generation hope today.

**Daniel 3: A Closer Look at the Three Young Men**

Chapter 3 of the book of Daniel, our main focus, can be broken down in the following way:

Following the Greek version (which is what the Catholic Church follows and which is used in modern Catholic translations [including the RSVCE], the passage can be divided into three parts: the first tells of the young men’s refusal to worship the statue set up by the king; for this they are condemned to the fiery
furnace (3:1-23); the second portion, which does not exist in the Aramaic text, records the prayers of the young men while in the furnace (3:1:68: notice the italic verse-numbering in chap. 3); the third tells of the king’s discovery that they are unscathed by the fire; as a result, he praises the God of Israel (3:24-4:3).¹⁴

The three main characters in the present story, along with Daniel who is not present, had two names each since they were changed by their captors in Babylon. “And the chief of the eunuchs gave them names: Daniel he called Belteshazzar, Hananiah he called Shadrach, Misha-el he called Meshach, and Azariah he called Abednego (DN. 1:7”). Some scholars believe that these young men never existed and are simply part of legends, and that Daniel was made up as well.¹⁵ When we read about the three young men, all of the elements of the backdrop make for a dramatic scene.

The setting is important to such a function primarily as a means of heightening the tension, enriching the danger, dramatizing the risk which faithful people will experience enroute to their vindication by the God who has supreme power even in the hanging gardens of Babylon.¹⁶

A huge statue, an array of musicians, everyone bowed down except for our heroes, and an actual furnace big enough to contain four people is the main backdrop of the scene where the three young men will have their faith tested. They have been taken away from their land and are among a new community that does not care for their beliefs. Yet, these three young men still cling to their traditions and old community as their connections to God and their people run far deeper than proximity to their homeland.

¹⁶ Ibid., 22.
The crisis ensues when King Nebuchadnezzar sets up a golden image for everyone to worship at the sound of music. While sources are not certain, the golden image could have been in the likeness of the king himself.\(^{17}\) “Some scholars think that Nebuchadnezzar constructed this image of memory of his father, Nabopolassar. Others are equally convinced that he made it to Bel, the pagan god of Babylon. It is more likely that he made it of himself.”\(^{18}\) Quite literally, he may have been testing his people to ascertain who was with or against him. “The demand placed upon all of his subordinates by Nebuchadnezzar is surely analogous to the contemporary experience of the loyalty oath.”\(^{19}\) As anyone moves up in the ranks, the greater the danger it is that surrounds them. “It is the higher ranks which stand in the greater peril, and those who occupy the loftier position are the more sudden in their fall.”\(^{20}\) It is easy to lose our step when we walk in high places. The temptation to vanity and self-importance is a constant threat, and when anything we do becomes simply about ourselves, it is then that the greatest tragedies occur.

The supernatural gift of hope, along with praise, are what brings forth strength and courage in a dismal situation. True hope will lead to praise, since our hope is in the promises of God rather than on the outer circumstances of our lives. This is what led to the steadfastness of faith of the three young men.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered the king, ‘O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace; and he will deliver us out of...”

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 49.
\(^{18}\) McGee, Daniel, 52.
\(^{19}\) Towner, Daniel: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, 50.
your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the gold image which you have set up.’ (Dn. 3:16-18).

It is in the great, “If it be so,” in which lies the key to their courage. For their belief that God is with them does not depend on whether or not they are saved, but rather in their faith that they belong to God and know of this relationship as their greatest gift.21 They have no need to answer the king, since their very act of defiance proves their resolve that there is only one God to worship.22 We see how this enrages the king and causes his desire to inflict such a cruel fate. Yet, another key teaching is that no man or woman on earth has the power to inflict everlasting torment on anyone. Even if cruel tortures were the lot of one’s entire life, it will still come to an end. Only God has that power to exact eternal peace or everlasting pain. God is the only one to fear, which as proverbs states is the first stage of knowledge (Pr. 1:7). This is not a servile fear, but one of such love that it is in awe of the object of its affection. The three young men, out of love, would rather suffer cruel torture than forsake their God. This is how, to our amazement, that the apostles in Acts went away with joy having been persecuted for the faith. “So they took his advice, and when they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name (Acts 5: 40-41).” They did this knowing that hope in the goodness of God does not mean vindication in this life, but in the life to come.

21 Whitcomb, Daniel: Everyday Bible Commentary, 62.
22 Jerome, Book of Daniel with Commentary by Saint Jerome, 39.
This firm resolve provokes rage in those who oppose unwavering dedication and faith. The king has the furnace heated seven times hotter as the three young men are bound and cast inside. In the midst of the torment that is being threatened upon them, they actually emerge without even the smell of fire upon them. Paradoxically, their aggressors suffered the fate they were trying to inflict. “Not only was it intended that the miracle should strike terror but also that his own army might experience injury.”23 Those who attempted to show their might before God are foiled by their own devices. The three young men show us that even in the face of humiliation and pain, acts of faith have an impact on everyone involved, including our enemies. Towner puts it together eloquently.

And though we may go to the wall before the firing squad or into the heart of a fire storm, we can make such events meaningful, not absurd, by facing them squarely and denying on principle the right of the powers of this world to deflect us from the ways of justice and peace.24

No death for the truth is a death in vain. No humiliation for God will go unrewarded in the life to come. Among the flames the three young men cry out, not in terror, but in praise of God. Taken from the Liturgy of the Hours, the Sunday morning antiphon is, “From the midst of the flames the three young men cried out with one voice: Blessed be God, alleluia.”25 When we praise God in our suffering, it brings forth the presence of God, or rather puts us in a posture to receive blessings from our Creator. In this particular story, God is willing to show what normally lies hidden. It is the fact that God is always with us and will be by our side, even if we can only see God through the eyes

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of faith. As the king looks inside the furnace, there is the mysterious fourth figure that appears. Towner purposes that the fourth figure could have been Daniel rather than God; regardless, most see this as God breaking in miraculously. McGee, sees the future of God saving humanity and has no problem claiming the fourth person as Jesus. “In the fourth Man present in the furnace, we see that the Lord Jesus was there with them. He will be with them also in the day of the Great Tribulation, with those who are His as they go through the trials of that period.” It is in their great hymn that one learns how to offer up proper praise to God. Even in the prayer they make, mystery surrounds the text as different translations of the Bible omit it. Along with the Hebrew texts of the book of Daniel, there are also Greek and Latin versions which contain more chapters, including the psalm of Azariah and the song of the three young men. “Jews and Protestants consider these passages to be apocryphal, but the Catholic Church defined them as canonical at the Council of Trent; therefore, Catholics call them “deuterocanonical” parts of Daniel.” I personally pray these passages often, since they are an important part of the Liturgy of the Hours and used for major feast days. The prayer of the three young men give us all an example of how to structure praise to God.

This magnificent hymn begins with praises addressed directly to God (vv. 29-34); then it calls on others to join in (vv. 35-65); and it ends by explaining why the three young men in particular should praise and thank God (vv. 66-68). This means that attention is focused first on God himself and his greatness, then on his creatures in heaven and on earth, and finally on the particular favors he does for those who fear him.

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26 Towner, Daniel: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, 55.
27 McGee, Daniel, 63.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid., 820.
First, all adoration belongs only to God. Then praise moves in its natural order descending to God’s creation and favors that are bestowed upon us by our God.

King Nebuchadnezzar was enraged by the defiance of the youths. Yet, in the end, he was forced to recognize that the God of Israel is the God of power and strength. “There is nothing personal in this expression of Nebuchadnezzar; yet he recognizes the omnipotence of the living God and His power in delivering these three men. He grants that their God is superior to his.”

Their firm resolve and obedience to the one true God, the world’s rage against their ardor, were what changed the heart and mind of their tormentor. God will always use that which the world calls weak to confound the strong.

**Personal Reflection on Daniel 3**

When I had a true conversion of heart and allowed God to put my life in order, I had the belief that most of my suffering would pass. I quickly learned, that while I was no longer the cause of my suffering, that suffering would come to me precisely because I valued my relationship with Jesus. In fact, now that I am a Catholic priest, I sometimes find myself being treated as if I am a criminal. I was not prepared to be hated because of my beliefs. Many books recounting the lives of past martyrs, those imprisoned in consecration camps, and any story of someone suffering for their belief were a source of great solace and strength for me. It taught me that living through these experiences can be a great work pleasing to God. The impact of these legends, their trials, and deaths proved that hearts were converted to God. While my past and current sufferings are not

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31 McGee, *Daniel*, 64.
remotely similar to those who have actually died for the faith, I still find hope in these disciples’ firm resolve and direction of how to live my life. I have heard it said that many people could die a heroic death if it were sprung upon them at some great hour. Yet, the slow monotonous little “deaths” of everyday life are often more difficult to bear. The parishioner that is never pleased, the work that is never finished or appreciated, and the hurtful words proclaimed in the media often wound more deeply than one would think.

The story of the three young men has the ability to enkindle courage and fortitude in all those who seem to be attacked over and over again. Just as Christ continued to carry the cross after falling three times, we, his disciples, continue to pick up our own cross and continue following after the Master. Jesus tells us in the Beatitudes, “Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you (Mt. 5:11-12).” When I saw “Pierrot” by Antoine Watteau, I immediately found a correlation between these stories, and began to draw and paint how this situation would appear. The next section will focus on Antoine Watteau, his painting “Pierrot,” and the main character of the piece. Yet, the foundation of the three young men must never be forgotten as we move forward.
Chapter 2: Antoine Watteau and Pierrot

Antoine Watteau

Antoine Watteau lived a relatively short life. He died at the age of thirty-six in 1721. He was not born in France but rather in the town of Valenciennes in Flanders. Much of his life is a mystery where facts and fiction become intertwined. “The nuggets of reliable information about his life, however, are few and far between, so that every attempt to construct a biography from what scattered facts there are appears bound to fail.” This would begin to connect the life of Watteau with the book of Daniel as each have questions about their historicity and authenticity. What friends and biographers do agree upon is that Watteau was more of a recluse and kept to himself, unable to commit himself to anything but his art. He did not even have a permanent address throughout his life. As a painter beginning his career in Paris, life was difficult since there were strict rules for artists who were not members of the Royal Academy. One had to study under a master and eventually get accepted into the painter’s guild, or if one was lucky, to be employed in one of the royal palaces outside the jurisdiction of the guild. After Watteau worked for a number of years on the production lines creating quick copies of famous art, he later worked under the artist Claude Gillot, who was known for painting scenes from the commedia dell’arte, in which Watteau would become fascinated.

36 Ibid., 24.
37 Ibid.
himself. After an alleged falling-out with Gillot, he then worked under the artist Claude Audran. Finally, after many years of trying, and then after procrastination on the completion of his reception piece, he was accepted into the Royal Academy in August of 1717. It was said that he did not go to any of the meetings that were held each month after only attending two. This may be due to his feelings of being an outsider for most of his life. “He was a reserved and thoughtful man, dissatisfied with himself to the point of bitterness.” Even a quick survey of his paintings would seem to suggest that he always felt himself an outsider looking in on what others were doing. As an artist myself, struggling to survive before becoming a priest, the rejection of being admitted into art exhibitions or represented by a gallery, and long hours in the studio can cause an artist to feel quite isolated. All of the politics surrounding the buying and selling of artworks is a joyless task to a person who just wants to create art. Strangely enough, by the year 1717 and onwards, Watteau had the opposite problem of multiple dealers and collectors requesting his work. I can only imagine that this made him feel more like the odd one out, as this loner now became the awkward center of attention, much like his painting of Pierrot, and like the three young men exiled to a foreign land.

Watteau was never slack in learning as much as he could by himself, and spent long hours studying, drawing, and copying from artists who came before him. This included the many greats like Rubens, van Dyke, Veronese, and Titian, whose paintings were all

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38 Ibid., 27.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid., 52.
42 Lauterbach, Antoine Watteau: 1684-1721, 53.
easy to find in Paris at this time. Yet, all artists have their weaknesses and critics will always debate them. Watteau has been accused by some of not knowing how to work with color, while others defended him fiercely.

When writers criticize Watteau’s color, when they say that he is a sublime draftsman but often an unsatisfactory painter, it is because they have misread as uncertainty what is in fact his extraordinary grasp of this unsettledness, this disunity, this bafflement. Watteau’s color stubbornly defies description. His color is unmoored, a ceaseless surprise that is often almost colorless, a physicality or palpbility that is suggested without being fixed, a never-ending battle between local color and the color of light itself.

The meaning of this will become apparent when we take a closer look at his painting “Pierrot,” in the next section. Since Watteau did not have formal studies in painting, and that he was made to work fast in the reproduction shop, many believe this had a huge impact on the preservation of his work. As I mentioned in the introduction, a process must be followed in the creation of an oil painting or it will soon come to ruin. This has been the cruel fate of many of Watteau’s paintings.

The spontaneity that is so often admired in Watteau’s painting, and the momentum of his brushstroke, has consequently come at a price: deep cracks frequently mark the surface of Watteau’s canvases, while the sloppy, hasty application of his paints has meant that many of his works are today in poor condition and have occupied generations of conservators.

Antoine Watteau is believed to have died in July of 1721 of consumption in a village near Paris. Almost immediately after his death the questions began to arise concerning whether he was just a solid draftsman instead of a master painter, or vice-versa, since he

43 Ibid., 78.
44 Perl, Antoine’s Alphabet: Watteau and His World, 44-45.
46 Ibid., 7.
did not have any of the academic training of the time. Yet, maybe because of the fact that he had no formal training made him all the more a master. Regardless, even after his death, he still was not fully accepted as a painter, the one thing to which he was committed to for his life. While so much more could be written about him and his interests, this brief introduction to his life makes the point that he was one who felt like an outcast, similar to the character Pierrot and the three young men in a foreign land from the book of Daniel. Knowing this may help us understand why Pierrot was the subject of many of his paintings, as we examine one of his most famous pieces.

“Pierrot” the Painting

“Pierrot” by Antoine Watteau (See figure 1), also known as “Gilles,” is an oil painting on canvas, 184.5 x 149.5 cm, painted in the year 1718. It hangs in the Louvre and is believed to have been acquired by Vivant Denon, Napoleon’s art expert. It is important to look at all of the details of this piece, for they make up the many components of my artwork for the series I created for this thesis. There is not an entirely huge range of vibrant colors to greet the viewer. Yet, the stark white suit of the central figure Pierrot announces that he is the focal point.

The white of his costume—a muted white, an ivory white—is a great open expanse, roughly rectangular in shape, dominating the painting, so that the figure itself becomes a tabula rasa, a bare canvas or bare stage or sheet of paper, a place where nothing has yet happened but anything and everything can and will happen.

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49 Ibid., 46.
50 Perl, *Antoine’s Alphabet: Watteau and His World*, 188.
Watteau’s paint strokes for “Pierrot” are not as noticeable as in his other paintings, but the style can still be classified as painterly. This may be due to the manner in which he learned to paint, adding more oils than necessary, due to his involvement in a reproduction shop when he first came to Paris. Pierrot stands almost center, slightly to the left, as his gaze is fixed on the viewer. He stands alone on stage and suggests that this is more than just an actor playing his part. “Some authors have wished to see in it a reflection of the figure of the painter in the sense of a self-portrait and have drawn comparisons with the figure of the despised Christ in the Flagellation.” I find this notion heartening, since I drew my connection with Pierrot to the biblical figures of the three young men in the fiery furnace. Also, part of my own work makes Pierrot a stand-in for myself as a self-portrait. All the other actors are off-stage and seem to have been lazily focused on Pierrot and had just turned away. The painting suggests that he is an object of humiliation, as even the statue that flanks the right side seems to be amused. Pierrot is a character in the commedia dell’arte which are plays largely improvisational. His face is one that is complacent as one resigned to his fate.

The expression worn by the silent Pierrot, with his portrait-like features, has been variously described as motionless, expectant, melancholy and roguish. Like the smile of the Mona Lisa, however, the position of the corner of his mouth remains vague. His face becomes a mirror of the person opposite.

He is staring down upon the viewer and asking questions we can only imagine. His large pantaloons and oversized shirt add an air of absurdity. Yes, he is playing a

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52 Ibid., 46.
53 Ibid.
character, but the actor may be the very thing he portrays on stage. His arms hang in submission as his open hands display there is nothing left to offer. The foliage of the garden close around him creates a natural frame within the painting. The bit of open sky behind him suggests a glimmer of hope in what would rather be a dismal outcome to another day of playing the fool. Yet, is it all an illusion? Some suggest that it is so. “Behind this platform, the other actors are coming up behind him with the donkey, and the background is a painted backcloth, strictly speaking a picture within the picture.”54

Pierrot is much larger than anyone else in the painting. More than just a focal point, he is the tragic hero of some plot we are unaware of. There is more being told in this story than what is being shown in the painting, and the viewer will have to complete the parts that are missing. Much of Watteau’s work functions in this way. “He is a master of in-between situations, less interested in life as a stage than in the preparations for going onstage, or how actors feel after they’ve made their exits.”55 This gives the painting an air of being unresolved even though there is nothing left to paint. The rest of the figures in the painting are in the background but tell an important story. They are characters in the play, and certainly people in the actor’s life, but they all seem to be waiting for something to happen. Whoever they are, they surround Pierrot more in opposition, like the stubborn donkey being ridden, rather than the friends he can count on.

These are just a few of the many details that may be considered when viewing this piece, all of which might not be readily available to a person speeding through the Louvre or flipping through an art history book. These details however, are how one is to “read”

54 Borsch-Supan, Antoine Watteau: 1684-1721, 62.
55 Perl, Antoine’s Alphabet: Watteau and His World, 13.
the painting. This is how the story gets related, as it takes time to ponder each portion of the piece. The character Pierrot has a long history and is an important layer. A quick look at this character will aide in our discussion.

**Pierrot the Character**

There is something about the character of Pierrot that has fascinated people throughout the centuries. The quintessential clown for the ages, he has been the subject of many artist’s repertoire. Some notable artists are Paul Cezanne, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Pablo Picasso, and Andre Derain. Pierrot is one of the characters of the *commedia dell’arte* which had its start in the Italian theater of the Renaissance and was popular throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁵⁶ “In the popular *commedia dell’arte* there were no set dialogues, but just outlines of a scenario.”⁵⁷ Each of the stock characters had their own personalities which the actors would use to improvise the sketch.⁵⁸ Pierrot as a character has gone through many changes over time as each new interpretation of him changed his persona.

Each of Pierrot’s adjustments, however, leaves its mark on his personality. Though he may preserve a central core of characteristics as he passes from theater to theater and from genre to genre, he is never quite the same personage from one to the other.⁵⁹

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⁵⁸ Ibid.
In his long history, the character Pierrot was known by many names until he finally was adapted in France and his name stayed Pierrot in 1665. Many of the commedia plays were centered around family life having Pierrot as the youngest son. Hence, why he wore his baggy hand-me-downs from his older brothers. As I looked at the painting “Pierrot” for the first time, it reminded me of a person that remains strong in the midst of torment. Even the look on his face communicated this to me. To my amazement, this is actually what the character is supposed to portray. A listing of his characteristics says as much: “Stoicism in the face of misery, survived his oppression by pretending to be simple. Anesthetized his sensitivity by pretending to have no feelings. Gives vent to feelings only when alone. Totally honest.” And just like Watteau himself, his character was always the loner. A great deal of books surround this genre of theatre and the many transformations, along with its characters, throughout the years. The important part to keep in mind is that the Pierrot of Watteau’s painting was exactly what I needed him to be upon my first viewing; the humiliated outcast resolute in his conviction. This leads us to the next chapter where I combine Pierrot and the three young men, and create a series of assemblages to show how stories work in conjunction with scripture to bring out particular meanings through the use of layering.

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61 Ibid.
62 Ibid., 136.
63 Ibid.
Chapter 3: Layered Thoughts and Images: Pierrot, Daniel, and the Preacher

Connecting All Three

This chapter will explore the similarities between the artistic process of layered images and the homiletic praxis of layering stories onto the biblical text in the creation of a sermon. Drawing on personal experience, a description of my artistic practice and an original series of assemblages, I will exhibit how my artistic response to Daniel 3 illumines the message of the text and shows how stories can be used as a hermeneutic and homiletic tool. First, we will examine my connection and reasoning behind layering the painting “Pierrot” and the three young men in the fiery furnace taken from the book of Daniel.

I enjoy blending in with the native residents as I travel. In the first year of my priesthood, I enjoyed the opportunity of traveling to Paris, France, in order to visit the many churches and museums. This was a difficult year of adjustment for me in coming to terms with understanding who I was perceived as in the eyes of the public. I decided that as I traveled, I would not wear my clerics unless I was specifically going to celebrate Mass at a particular church. Even in regular clothing, however, I remained painfully aware of how much I appeared out of place to the people around me. People were constantly looking in my direction, and for whatever reason, it was difficult navigating the sidewalks without bumping into people speeding on their way. Possibly these were emotions that I carried from home as I had a very difficult time settling into my new parish life and living situation. I felt as if there was no place I had of my own. My
routine in Paris had me beginning my day in a beautiful church for prayer while the afternoons were reserved for visiting the incredible museums. Through these days of thoughtful prayer, I began to see my situation from a new perspective, understanding how God was accompanying me through these dark times. It was during the time of these realizations that I came across the painting “Pierrot” in the Louvre. I felt as if it was a portrait of me. In addition, it caused me to think directly of the three young men in the fiery furnace who had suffered at the hands of those in authority. As God was with them in the fire, so God would accompany me through whatever “fiery” situation in which I found myself in. I imagined that the face of Pierrot would resemble the faces of the three young men, standing resolute and unwavering in the midst of scrutiny. My response to this led me to begin creating art again after a significant break, along with contemplating the correlation between my life, the painting, and the three young men in the fiery furnace. That night I sketched Pierrot for the first time in my tiny hotel room (figure 2). As I travelled from Paris to my spiritual retreat in Ars, I reflected deeply regarding what my role as a priest is in the world today. Without fail, I realized that I am to preach the Gospel at all times through both word and action. Initially, I felt extremely lonely with the weight of this realization on my shoulders, but soon realized that I am never alone with God by my side. There was a power in me that came from “the call,” as James Earl Massey writes, “A genuine experience of a divinely given call to preach is one of the factors that assist us to bear the burdens associated with the pulpit experience.”¹ I was required to grow accustomed to being scrutinized like the young man in the painting

“Pierrot.” Yet, I was not to act out a role but rather to actually become a holy fool for Christ.²

Visual art is a story told through composition, color, form, and images. Art can also employ a literary element, as will later be seen in my own work. When I first began my journey in the study of art, I did as many do by copying the masters. As I attempted matching paint stroke for paint stroke, I realized that this was a futile endeavor. However, I began to realize that one can take the concept and image of the master and rearrange it, adding or subtracting layers, creating a new original work with an alternative meaning. In a work of this type, viewers would first recognize something with which they were already familiar, and then consider the difference created by the changes made. A great deal of my work throughout the years has been a reflection of famous paintings viewed with a new perspective. For instance, “Doubt”, was a piece I created while still in seminary (figure 3). In it, I study the painting of Caravaggio’s “The Incredulity of Saint Thomas” (figure 4). The original is in full color, even though it is in the famous chiaroscuro style, where light drenches the object in the midst of a sea of darkness. It is the moment Jesus arrives in the upper room, and Thomas, surrounded by a few others, is having his finger guided by Jesus into the open wound in Jesus’ side. As this was a difficult time for Thomas to believe, so it was the same for me in my discernment regarding my call to the priesthood. Much like Thomas, I wanted physical undeniable proof that this vocational call was real. The painting was completed in black and white

since I wanted a concrete yes or no answer. Black and white is also what a Catholic priest wears as his daily clerical apparel. Experiencing questions regarding my vocation, I also was struggling with the idea of being a person constantly in the public eye. Hence, I attached the clerical attire to the canvas as I sewed and stuffed the clothing to incorporate dimension. Since my piece is wrapped in the original, along with the powerful subject matter of this awesome biblical event, it adds to the weight and provenance of my work which would otherwise suffer if not linked to the master. It builds upon the original work by suggesting something not entirely new but out of the ordinary. We all have doubt and this painting was a window into mine at that particular time.

“Hope,” is a piece that is painted entirely with oils on canvas, devoid of any sculptural element (figure 5). It is a mixture of famous paintings combined with many elements of my own. I literally show the colors used for the painting on the right side of the piece in order to demonstrate how the painting was built up, revealing the different layers by not completing entire sections. The first layer was a wash of yellow that was spread upon the entire canvas. According to composition, these yellow elements that peek through and push forward towards the viewer are actually the furthest and most basic elements of the painting that normally are hidden. It is a game that is being played with the viewer’s visual perception. The doctor is a familiar face, but out of his normal illustrative setting, one might forget that he is from a Norman Rockwell piece. The doctor is searching for light in the midst of darkness. What appears as a mistake of white paint in the center of the canvas is actually the lack of all paint and is a point of light shining in the darkness.
Inside the white area is the word “hope,” that which the good doctor has been seeking (figure 6).

Before creating the series for this thesis, I did a number of smaller pieces to stir up thoughts and emotions. I experimented with Antoine Watteau’s “Pierrot” by putting him in some type of darkness surrounded with words. I had been enthralled by the image for quite some time and a small water color was the first “new” piece to emerge (figure 7). I also was sketching at this same time (figure 8). Since I perceived Pierrot as a figure of one of the three young men in the fiery furnace, I quickly began using words from the Liturgy of Hours that incorporates the prayer of these men. The constant repetition and thought process led me to doing small cut outs with mixed media on watercolor paper. They are dark environments where little cut-up Pierrots pose among different layers of color, shapes, words, and lines. They are short statements dealing with hope in dark places. The top word or words are in contrast to the lower words in which Pierrot seems to be either immersing in or emerging out (see figured 9-11). Hope is constant but not necessarily the first response a viewer will have to this work. It has to be searched out, as all of us, must find the strength and courage to carry on in what may seem futile endeavors. The theological virtue of hope must be cultivated and practiced. It is well to note that even though there may be no “visual” reference to the three young men, Pierrot stands in place for them. And when needed, he also stands in place for us. These are examples of works leading up to this series as they demonstrate how applying different layers in an art collage conveys a story. When viewed as a whole, each layer and element
act as a “chapter” in a novel, creating an experience that the viewer “reads” as they immerse themselves more deeply into the canvas or board.

**Threatened in an Exiled Land**

I was deeply affected by the painting “Pierrot” when feeling alone in a foreign land, which happened to be Paris at this time. This is not unlike the three young men who were ripped from their homeland and made to live in a place different from their own. All of us know this feeling even if we have never left the place where we grew up. This could be the new school we attend, the first day on a job, or the different role in which we happen to find ourselves. It was in the first year of me becoming a priest and I felt singled out and an oddity to others. I was so worried I would make a mistake that even ordering a pizza over the phone made me nervous because I did not know how to introduce myself. In addition, everyone seemed to be staring at me wherever I went. In this feeling of humiliation and suffering, the image of Pierrot was one that gave me hope. This message encouraged me to continue persevering since, like myself, others have persevered through trials, and that I would not be left to go through these trials alone. This Pierrot in the painting was a young man like myself and also similar to the young men in the fiery furnace. I experienced the assurance that I would survive these trials no matter what situation presented itself. This series of assemblages considers all that surrounds the notion of suffering with and for Christ while still knowing of God’s love for us. This particular section focuses on the feeling of being the one singled out of the crowd because Jesus has called us out of this world rather than to be of the world (Jn.
15:19). This is a message of hope that does not promise unending consolations while following Jesus, but rather it is the suffering that has the effect of the sanctification of souls.

Just as there are many considerations in making art, such as size, color, medium, and application, so it is similar in selecting the appropriate story that will be presented at the opening of one’s homily. Whether we preach from a lectionary or choose our own scripture passage, many questions have to be well thought out and considered. Questions regarding the message being conveyed, how we experience that lesson, and how others may perceive the initial rendering of the passage are all good places to begin. To employ a personal story, it must be similar to the message of the text but different enough in order to extract various meanings. Other details to consider are the length of the story, what details should be included or excluded, how much personal information to insert, and the type of story being told. I often find humorous stories about my own personal truths learned can have a positive impact. Even children will give their attention to these stories that use examples that may pertain to their lives such as movies, television shows, and video games. Once a story is chosen, there is plenty of room for creativity. “The power of improvisation, the power of variations on themes, the power of doing what you have already done but with a somewhat different inflection or intonation or intensity—this is happiness within tradition.”³ The structure of the homily doesn’t make it rigid but allows the preacher more freedom.

³ Perl, Antoine’s Alphabet: Watteau and His World, 80.
Even though I have been looking at the painting of “Pierrot” for a long period of time, I never took notice of the statue on the far-right side of the painting. In fact, many reproductions of the piece actually have this statue cropped out. It is of some mythical character of which I am not familiar. It gave me the impression of something ungodly, something that seemed dissonant to both me and Pierrot. Yet, it has no power since it is a lifeless object made by hands. The three young men knew this as well, for they would not bow down to the statue the king had erected for people to worship. It was very clear to our heroes that no matter where they happen to find themselves in this world, they would not bow down to a foreign god. Whether it is a statue of a fake god, or something of the culture that tells us we should worship it, such as fame or money, we simply turn our attention to the one true God. Just like these youths, I felt it necessary to omit this statue and did exactly that. I cut it out over and over again (figure 12). It was a meditative act, much like mumbling the prayers in a repetitious devotion similar to the rosary. All of the various sizes of these cut-outs began to stack up in neatly ordered lines like a force to be reckoned with. They acted like the fire trying to consume Pierrot. Stacked neatly, glued individually piece by piece, it became a confrontation with that which tries to consume us each and every day in the piece “Fact/Fake” (figures 13-14). Yet, it has no effect on me, Pierrot, the youths, or anyone unless it is given permission. It is a fact that it is a fake threat as the title suggests. The words hang from top to bottom like a billboard sign over the images neatly pasted over one another. A passage like Peter experiencing the wind of the storm comes to mind as he becomes frightened because his imagination took control of him. We become frightened often by what we perceive
might happen to us. Using the passage of the three young men in the furnace and focusing our preaching on what it means to not be afraid of perceived threats, one can begin a homily by telling a story of a time when they were frightened for no reason. Such as the time I thought something was floating across my room, only to realize that it was my glow in the dark chain coming into view as I passed in front of a mirror in the middle of the night. The message is that we are to trust God when we feel threatened by any outside force, either real or imagined. While making this particular piece, I was caught up in the meditation that I never noticed the statue in the original for such a long time. It helped to inform the homily that there is no need to give these threats any type of heed. If we do not focus on them, they will simply vanish.

There are other characters pictured in the original piece. On the left side of the painting is one individual shrouded in darkness, riding on a donkey. Could this represent King Nebuchadnezzar? He can be seen as the one mocking Christ or trying to take his authority, making fun of Jesus who rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. Since he has no real power, he seems like the one that blows up someone’s Facebook account and smears a person on Twitter. We want to retaliate but realize it will only make us look worse if we enter into the “foreign” land. He is stubborn, and his lies cover everything, making a person hope for the light. This piece is entitled “Light/Loss” (figures 15-16). As this individual was repeatedly cut out, the original image, lighter in color, remains a testament to the fact that he, or someone like him, will always be there in our lives. There will always be people who will hate and malign us. It seems as if it may bury us in a sea of trouble, but light will always triumph over darkness. Even if their lies continue, the truth
will always set us free. An experience to begin a homily about standing strong when being calumniated seems fitting for this consideration. The story of how a lie turned my world upside down, only to discover who my true friends were might take on a serious tone, but this is a serious topic that many people fear. Social media can be the furnace that threatens to bury a person with no chance to defend themselves, yet in the end, the truth will always triumph. Just seeing the darkness in the particular piece, offered me a reminder to always be prepared for battle. We are in a struggle against principalities and powers, and a healthy prayer life will keep us strong and fit. Ephesians 6 reminds us to put on the full armor of God, knowing that the Word of God is the sword that cuts through any darkness.

A Self-Portrait of Sorts

Living an examined life is living a holy life. We must take stock of our words and actions to make sure our lives are on the right path. Yet, before the discussion of the next assemblage in the series that touches upon this topic, a closer look at the layering process should be considered. There were many different images that I cut from the original, and their application made a significant impact (figures 17-18). In works of art, composition is equally as important as the content, for the two go hand in hand. Too much color, too heavy on one side, or lack of order is as ineffective as a homily without clear direction. The viewer’s gaze should be directed around the surface of the painting, but also in and out of depth. The painting should keep the eye in flux just as the homily should keep the mind active as one listens. In essence, the viewer and listener are a part of the art or
homily. As far as composition and completion are concerned, the artist needs to have a firm concept of the ending point of the work. Yes, there may be new discoveries along the way, but different angles need to be carefully considered and thought through before the piece becomes muddled.

Most artists have explored some type of self-portrait in their lifetime. Early in my career I experimented with many such works as a means of self-discovery exploring what my place is in the world. It is also important as a preacher to understand oneself because the self has an impact on how our message is received. Now as a priest, the character Pierrot is a stand-in for me, the three young men, and anyone who will identify with this piece. The work in question now is entitled “Head/Hole” (figure 19). In the furnace accompanying the three young men was the mysterious fourth figure that appeared different from the rest. This fourth individual brings into view something that is rather hidden from our physical eyes but is seen with the eyes of faith. This fourth person is Jesus, who is always with us, even in the midst of our suffering. To focus on Pierrot as a Christ figure can be compared to focusing on the interchange between Jesus and a priest. In the Catholic faith, a priest is considered to be ordained into the head of Christ. It is a unique kind of self-portrait that does not depict my appearance but rather my position or “office”. Hence the bold word “head” on the top to indicate where true authority resides (figure 20). Jesus is always the head of any church. The pastor’s role is to be as Christlike as possible by word and action. All of the bodies stacked one on top of another lack any heads because this signifies that many people try to usurp the pastor’s role in what they think should be done within any given church. The head of the pastor is
taken off each time the pastor makes a decision that people do not like, even if done clearly and with consultation. Again, this authority was given by God to be a servant to the many. In like manner, God gave wisdom and authority to the three young men over and above all the other youths that were trained with them. Jealously and envy dictated that they must rat out our heroes to the king when they refused to bow down to the statue. Many interpretations can be gathered from this one piece just as in reading a scripture passage. Just as the many layers steer a person to a finished thought of an art piece, so the story does when preaching upon the word of God. A story to aide in the lesson of being Christ-like, especially those in authority, could be the focus for humility in the act of service. Since authority can sometimes frighten or intimidate people, a humorous tone can be taken for the sake of releasing tension and building trust. “When preachers or teachers tell stories from their lives, especially ones that include failures or mistakes, they’re demonstrating a vulnerability that often yields credibility and trust. This, in turn, encourages others to do the same.”4 For instance, the day I officially became a pastor was the day I was on my hands and knees cleaning up the vomit of a parishioner who consumed too much at the parish Lenten fish-fry. Everybody went home, and I was left to clean up the mess. As I was on my hands and knees scrubbing I thought, “This is what it means to be a pastor. I will spend many of my days doing exactly this, spiritually speaking of course.” The creation of this piece reminded me that it is about being a servant to all people, but doing it in a way that seeks the approval of God.

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The next piece can be seen as a companion piece, as it is fashioned from the heads that were removed from the bodies in the former piece. This work is entitled “Fine/Fool” (figure 21). Self-reflection is the main thought as the focus is on the face of Pierrot. Instead of layers being constantly stacked upon the top of the other, these are now fanned out to create the shape of what appears to be a flower (figure 22). In viewing the piece closely, one can see the actual variance of height coming off the board. As anyone peering into a mirror can say or see many different things about themselves, i.e. “I am fine”, “I am a fool”, “I am a fine fool”, any of these reflections may or may not be accurate. Does not a trial by fire bring out either the worst or the best in us? Literally, the trial by fire for the three youth was a test that showed forth their courage. Having grown in love for their God, even the threats of pain bring them to praise. Have not we all seen these scenarios played out numerous times in our lives? Yet, God looks upon us all as cherished beautiful children. If God adorns the fields with the beauty of flowers that are gone from one day to the next, are we not cared for much more (Matt. 6:28-30)? This is a commentary on the disconnect between how God views us compared to how we perceive ourselves when it seems we are at our breaking point. These “flowers” cover the body of Pierrot and have the effect of making all the other noise in the original painting disappear. There does not seem to be any other threats in this floating garden but self-critique. The layers that cover the onlookers display who really is in control. The only person we have to contend with is ourselves. Sometimes we fail in the midst of suffering; although, this does not mean we have forfeited the love and mercy of God. When all seems lost, sometimes the only thing to do is to give praise to God. It takes our
focus away from ourselves and puts it on the one that should always be the object of our thought and desire. A story reminding us of how God views us highlights the fact that the three young men know that God loves them whether they are saved from the fire or not. For instance, a trip to Mexico left me ill and secluded, but provided me with the understanding that God still loved me in spite of my own self-evaluation as a failure. The only thing that brought me peace during this troubling time was immersing myself in God’s faithful word. I found a new love for God’s word, and I no longer felt abandoned in my pain but rested secure in the knowledge that God was always with me. This piece brought into view that we tend to focus too much on ourselves. Our focus should be on God, and then on those we serve, even the difficult ones.

Purified by Fire

This section is a commentary on what is good for us and what is not. Often, our lives turn out for the worse when we focus on the weeds rather than the life-giving wheat. However, we will first look at the work of the Holy Spirit working before diving into this topic. The third person of the Holy Trinity is the Holy Spirit. Since we do not know for certain who the fourth individual was in the fiery furnace with the young men, it could possibly be that the fourth was a manifestation of God in the person of the Holy Spirit. There is something strikingly beautiful contained in this thought. Since the Holy Spirit can at times be forgotten due to the fact that we lack a concrete physical image or representation, only the image of a dove or tongues of fire can provide us with something to harness our imaginations upon. Possibly the tongues of fire in the furnace elude to the
protection of the Holy Spirit. Both in works of art and sermons, there needs to be an openness to the Holy Spirit and also to where the Lord may be leading. A rigid script followed word by word can certainly be an inspired document, but at the same time can also diminish the Spirit in the moment it is delivered and received. Of the multiple Masses I preach on any given weekend, there are differences each time the homily is given due to the mood and spirit of the moment. Also, another function of the use of a story at the beginning of a homily is that it functions as a template for what is going to be communicated next. It is a built-in organizer for both me and the listener. Trusting in the Holy Spirit and how the Holy Spirit is leading has a rather significant effect on both the creation and delivery of a homily, and also the creation of works of art.

The next piece attempts to show reliance on the Holy Spirit as the images are stacked from the top to end on the bottom of the clay board (figure 23). Beginning on the top allows for the faces of the figures to remain but there is no guarantee that a sufficient number of cut-outs will be available to complete the thought and leave out gaps. This is one small example of how trust in the Holy Spirit will guide and lead in this endeavor. There is one particular piece in this series in which a hole would have been left if one last cut-out was not available to fill the gaps. I literally had to search the floor and excess of scraps to find just enough to finish or it would have all been for naught. Oftentimes we need to rely on the guidance of the Holy Spirit to see us through and to “cover” all that is necessary to make things complete. This can be a frightening place, but it is also the place where amazing insights and outcomes can be brought forward and realized.
The focus will now shift to how others view us and how we perceive their critical judgement in the piece entitled “Cool/Critical” (figure 24). The two individuals in the original painting appear to be conspiring against the character Pierrot (figure 25). It is as if they are sharing hidden rumors about the hero standing before us. Possibly this is not what is happening at all, yet the eyes of others can be frightful when standing alone before their gaze. Could this again be the other youths who were not as wise as the three young men and are jealous? How is it possible to remain calm and collected when being critically glared upon by others? Can one remain cool in all the many ways the word “cool” can be defined in the service of others? I have often felt overwhelmed when I imagined that even a few people are whispering lies concerning me. When I wear clerics, I can observe myself being singled out as I notice the facial expressions of people as I pass. At times it can seem almost overpowering when I sense a tidal wave of hostile stares. A simple story about remaining calm as the center of attention can assist in bringing home the concept of how the king had his gaze fixed on the three youths. Possibly the story of when I walked into a burger joint and the workers kept on saying Satan over and over again to get at my nerves. I did not back down but remained at the counter to demonstrate that I am not intimidated by them or the name of Satan. The youths literally remained “cool” when they became the object of scorn. Because they remained cool, it caught the attention of the king and converted hearts. This piece reminded me of how quickly we can change the minds of others if we just stand strong. In the homily, it is encouragement to be bold for Christ.
There is something about the color red used in this next piece entitled “Pure/Poison” (figure 26). In the original work, the character in red stands out, second only to the main character Pierrot. He appears important with his colorful suit but is still part of the group that makes up the “others.” His unique position with his outstretched arm would make for a perfect substitute as a tongue of fire if pasted with all the arms pointing up. Yet, circled on top of each other makes for a more beautiful flower image (figure 27). These are more striking than the flower heads made up of Pierrot. This can be a commentary on how we can be drawn to something that is not entirely for our benefit. This man can represent anything in this life that we wish we possessed but may not be all-together good for us. The new car beyond our price point, the house bigger than the neighbors, and the envy of someone else’s life that does not seem to suffer the way we have to suffer. He can also represent all those relationships that are harmful to our relationship with God. To yearn after these things is not beneficial for us and could actually be poison to our souls. Temptation promises to make life better, to feel happier, to know joy, and to experience peace until we give in and suffer for these wrong choices. To suffer for doing what is right can be joyful because it comes with the friendship of God, while to suffer from our own mistakes brings us down. Give into one, more will follow until you happen to find yourself in a garden of earthly delights that destroy the soul. The three young men preferred not to eat the finer things from the king’s table so as not to defile themselves and be led down the road of vanity toward a life of pleasure. A tale about how I had to let go of keeping the company of certain friends is an appropriate beginning for a homily when focusing on the lesson of not being led down the wrong path by others. It hurts to
say goodbye to those who have been our companions on so many journeys. This is a type of fire that we suffer when we choose Jesus over anybody or anything else of this earth. This piece is a reminder that all that is attractive is not necessarily for our betterment. In the homily this can be a reminder to not be deceived by the weeds that are hidden among the wheat.

**Reality or Illusion**

This section takes a look at how we perceive things compared to the reality behind it all. Briefly, we will focus on the use of words. Words are important because they are signifiers of truth and reality. We use words to convey meanings in order to transmit thoughts, ideas, and God’s message. The manner in which we construct word orders to complete sentences has an effect on how we are understood. Yet, in poetry and song, words can possess more weight due their context and placement, similar to how a portrait can communicate more than an ordinary photo. The layer of words in this series of art pieces can be seen or understood as two-word poems. They are not exact opposites but are held in tension between one another. The font is block, stating things in a matter of fact tone that is clear and concise. They are constructed of wood which adds to the idea of their permanence. Only the matte-medium is applied to seal them and their meaning onto the board. This layer explains the work if the viewer is willing to take the time to look and listen to the piece. In the same way, a story told at the beginning of a homily is attempting to convey everything that is going to be communicated in the remainder of the
sermon. If one opens themselves up to the story and listens to the underpinning truth, that truth can then be applied to the listener’s own life situation.

This next piece entitled “Ripe/Rotten” focuses on that which is behind Pierrot and harkens to the stuff in the background of our lives (figure 28). In the original painting, to the right of Pierrot and back in the distance, is a bush with two holes that seem to look like eyes. The material in the background always plays a part in the foreground of our lives. Taken from the point of the bush, Pierrot now becomes the background as the bushes continually are stacked up in front of him. Anything in life can be perceived differently if observed from a new perspective. If painted from an alternative vantage point, we could have been looking out from the bush onto the back of Pierrot, which is not a far stretch, as Watteau has framed many of his paintings as a voyeur to scenes off in the distance. By stacking the bush in front, we the viewer are caught in the act of looking into the drama that is unfolding (figure 29). Our own perspective now becomes altered when we come to terms with a new perspective not originally recognized. Our perspective on life should be viewed through the eyes of faith. God sees differently than we do because God looks into the human heart and knows our hearts and minds. The burning bush that Moses came in contact with in the desert was the manifestation of God that spoke of a new reality. If we see with the eyes of God, then we can see that which is ripe for the harvest. If we look with our own advantage in mind, rotten is the fruit that is usually produced. Are we willing to allow God to come to the foreground as we recede? A story of God’s plan unfolding over our own can set the tone when preaching about how the young men allowed God’s glory to shine forth by following God’s will and not their
own. This piece uncovered for me a renewed sense of the divine in each human being. That we are called to look past the externals, and see what God sees in each person. This should inform the homily to encourage people to see the good, or desire for good, in others.

The next piece in the series called “Faith/Foul” focuses again on that which is in the background (figure 30). The huge tree off to the right has many branches neatly manicured. The garden in which the characters are situated is one that is maintained for its patrons. By bringing this tree to the forefront it again requires us to view it in a different manner. The tree has a huge significance if one is to see it as the tree in the center of the Garden of Eden. The cross of Jesus is now the new tree of life where the fruit of his body and blood is a sacrifice of life-giving proportions. The cross becomes something beautiful that was once an instrument of torture. Arranged in a floral fashion, the limbs fan out as if veins on a plant providing life (figure 31). Is there fruit present on them? With faith, Jesus tells us that anything is possible. Beware, however that we do not just appear to have faith when there actually is none. Jesus curses the fig tree that is leafy and looks healthy but bears no fruit. It is foul even though it appears ready for the harvest. God is not concerned with what is on the exterior, but rather with what is on the interior. The multiple layers of “tree flowers” cover everything of the original painting. When we are placed in the crucible of life, will our faith carry us through to produce fruit from our sacrifice, or will it wither and fade and become foul since we had no root? The cross of Christ, the tree of life, is to be the only thing that we should boast of for it is the means of our salvation. The willingness of the three young men to sacrifice themselves
for the glory of God was able to produce a change of heart in the king who wanted them
dead. A story about willingly sacrificing ourselves for the glory of God would highlight
the aspect of God working on those who want us disposed of. Often, we wish to not
think of the cross. Yet, viewed in the proper light, we see the road that leads to heaven.
This is an encouragement for us all as we pick up our own crosses and follow Jesus.

Our last piece in the series highlights the very medium that is to unify everything.
Matte-medium not only acts as a thin layer to seal the work, but also can be employed
using multiple techniques. It is here that one can view the painterly aspect of these pieces
as the medium is visible enough to see the many lines of brushstrokes one would
normally see on a painting. The layer of the matte-medium can be the layer that is taken
for granted, similar to the structures that are relied upon in sermonic preparation and
execution. These are the formulas, transitions, and words used which unite the whole
thought together, but is often forgotten and not normally an aspect to highlight.

This last piece titled “Hope/Hurt” incorporates a heavy pour of the matte-medium
(figure 32). The outlining and covering of the faces were an exercise in erasing and
highlighting aspects of the painting. The medium over the dark areas of the painting
gives a childish aspect to the piece, similar to making smiley faces on a school notebook.
The words “hope” and “hurt” are buried in the medium which appears as if it is oozing
from the holes of the letters (figure 33). Again, the medium is a vehicle of displaying
how everything gets presented and unified. The story acts on the same level when we
incorporate them into a homily. Without it, it may seem that certain facts are just thrown
into the wind hoping that something will stick in the minds of the listeners. With a story
however, there is a calculated way in which the facts are linked to the messages that the preacher wishes to convey.

Each layer of these paintings and assemblages add new meanings to old thoughts and ideas. They explore aspects that may go unnoticed if not highlighted in themselves. Although, highlighting certain aspects of the original painting and adding layers to bring attention to certain details, the viewer is guided toward thinking of it in a totally new and different way. New perspectives are presented, and more wisdom can be mined from what may have seemed like a dry well of thought. These visual layers have the same effect as the manner in which a story would when told referring to a scripture passage. The story assists the listener in discovering new wisdom hidden just below the surface. The next chapter will offer an example of how all of these factors function in harmony in sermonic form.
Chapter 4: Sermonic Response

Brief Overview

The homily presented is one that would be presented to my current parish St. Ephrem. St. Ephrem is in the city of Sterling Heights, a suburban area of Metro-Detroit which hosts a diverse population. St. Ephrem has been a parish for over fifty years. It’s on a quieter street corner compared to the very congested street a mile down the road. Small ranch houses hug the perimeter of the property while across the street a much smaller Lutheran parish stands watch. In fact, there are over seven little churches on this same two-mile stretch of road. Many old statues taken from closed churches downtown have a lot to do with the interior atmosphere.

While the city of Sterling Heights is very ethnically diverse, many parishioners are Caucasian. There are also many second or third generation immigrants from Poland, Italy, Germany, and Maltese. There is a total of seven hundred and seventy families registered. The parish is made up of middle to working class people who are friendly and generous to those in need. The majority of the parishioners were seniors, but now has a growing population of married young adults with small children. There are also smaller pockets of Chaldeans, Albanians, Hispanics, Vietnamese, and Filipinos that attend.

This chapter highlights a homily which incorporates a story to give an example of how a story can open up the meaning behind the scripture passage. The scripture for the day would be Daniel 3, the story of the three young men in the fiery furnace. A homily is best heard by the listener rather than read on a page. However, for the sake of the current format, the text will have to be sufficient. The reader must keep in mind that during the
Homily

I prefer to not be the center of attention as I’m an introvert and somewhat of a hermit. I would rather blend in with the crowd and go unnoticed than to have a discerning eye on me. Even when I travel, I do everything in my power to fit in with the local customs and dress so as to pass unnoticed. This all changed abruptly, the day after my ordination, when I started wearing clerics everywhere I went. I am usually aware of my surroundings, but after putting on the collar, I became hyper-sensitive to people around me and how they responded. Any place in public I went, I now noticed all the sideway glances, obvious stares, and the occasional scowl from an unfriendly face. If I looked people in the eye, some would look away while others would give a friendly smile. Every now and then, the occasional person would engage in some conversation. However, I was not prepared for the single question that would come to be posed to me in all different places and situations. Let me explain in the way it came to me.

There I was, in a popular shoe warehouse store looking for some dress shoes that would be more comfortable. I was there for quite a while trying on all the different brands and lost track of my surroundings. About a half hour into my shopping, a lady appeared at my side and said, “Excuse me?” A little caught off guard, as normally I’m not, I simply replied, “Yes?” She locked eyes with me and said in a soft tone, “Follow me.” There was a desperate look in her face that seemed to communicate that some real
help was needed. She began to lead me to the back corner of the store where all the clearance shoes, stacked neatly in their boxes, towered over our heads. I learned earlier on as a priest that when people have something very personal to say, they look for a place of safety so that no other ears can hear. Only the clearance shoes stood guard around us and their tongues never speak. A little nervous about what might be said, I gave a friendly smile to convey that all will be all right. I wondered, was her marriage falling apart? Did she want a confession? I waited for her to speak, and in a very soft and calculated tone, she looked up at me and said, “Do you work here?” That was her question. “Do you work here?” At that particular time, as I was completely caught off guard again, all I could say was, “No.” She smiled and said, “Thank you,” and walked away. I thought this strange, but believe it or not, I started to get asked that question wherever I went. I would be shopping for something at any given store, and someone would casually come up and ask, “Do you work here?” Sometimes it would be more specific like, “Can you tell me where the undershirts would be?” At first, I didn’t know what to say. Now my response is, “I work everywhere! How can I help?”

This question was rather confusing until I started to unpack the meaning behind it. Two answers came to mind. First is that the culture is so far removed from organized religion that many people do not recognize what used to be a quite common image in everyday society. Gone are the days when they made hit movies with Bing Crosby playing the parish priest hero in “The Bells of St. Mary.” In today’s culture, the clerical garb is so completely out of the ordinary, that people are befuddled to its meaning. I sometimes feel like it is a clown suit since it attracts so many questioning eyes. Those
who do know something about the collar are either friendly or hostile. Certain people cannot help but say “sir” after every sentence to show some respect. On the opposite end, I have been treated like a fortune teller, asked to pick winning numbers, received horrible service at restaurants, been called all types of names including pedophile, and even had people call out for Satan as I entered the room. My presence evokes a reaction from people. There have been many times I wished I could run away, or at least explain myself, but have had to stand there and take it all in.

The second reason is more telling as to why people ask me the question, “Do you work here?” When people see anyone in any type of uniform, they expect that person to be working. If we see a police officer in blues, a fireman in overalls, or a doctor in a lab coat, we automatically know that they are on duty. Even to a lesser degree, when all the workers at a store are dressed the same with a name tag, we know that they get paid to be there. So, when someone sees that I’m wearing my clerics and doesn’t know what it means they think, “This is someone who is supposed to be working.” They are absolutely right. Wherever I go and whatever I do, I’m supposed to be another Christ to everyone I meet. My tongue and cheek response, “I work everywhere! How can I help?” is no longer a joke but a reality. And this is not unique to myself. Anyone bearing the name of Christian is subject to the same scrutiny. All of us have been baptized into Christ, having put on Jesus and letting our old self pass away. We are all wearing a uniform in the form of Jesus! Mine may be a little more visible, but by our words and actions, people will know who we follow. In a time where Christians are being persecuted around every corner, this can be a scary concept to consider. Yet, fear should
never get the best of us! A quick look at the three young men from the book of Daniel can be of some help.

The three young men did not conform to the culture they were thrust into and would not worship anyone other than the one true God of Israel. They were foreigners being held captive in a land that was very different than their own. Even their names were changed to reflect their new reality. Yet, their love for God would remain no matter what was promised or threatened of them. All the finery, education, and opportunity given them by the king were as fodder. It was by God’s grace they were wiser than all the other servants in the kingdom. They choose to drink water and eat vegetables so as to not offend God by eating from the King’s table, and yet, they looked heathier than the other youths being instructed. God is the giver of all these gifts and they recognized that only God has the power to give or take away. Even further, they know that if God does not save them in this world, that does not mean that God has abandoned them. This type of faith scares those who do not place their trust in anything other than themselves. King Nebuchadnezzar wanted everyone’s obedience, and when he did not get it, he chose to kill them in a fit of rage. The furnace was heated seven times hotter than normal and the three men were bound and thrown into that fire. The furnace was so hot that even their executioners were taken in the process. Yet for our heroes, the very flames meant to kill only loosened their bands to set them free. Praise was on their lips and a whistling wind came about them so that they were even shielded from the smell of smoke. We see in their example that true worship and praise brings forth the presence of God. We remember Jesus’ words, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in
the midst of them (Mt. 18:20).” We do not know exactly who the fourth figure was in the furnace with them, but it is plain to see that it was a miracle ordained by God. In the end, King Nebuchadnezzar witnessed that there is no other god more powerful than the God of Israel. By not waver ing in their faith, standing up for truth, their actions led to conversion of hearts. Are we willing to suffer for God? Are we willing to stand up for our faith? Will we give in to the way of the culture because it is easier?

You and I are different than the rest of the world. This world is a foreign place for us as we journey toward an eternal home in heaven. Just like the three young men, we also received the new name at our birth to new life. Our name is Christian. And like my clerics that I wear publicly for all to see, so we all wear a mark, which is the indelible mark made upon our souls at baptism. For we know that from the baptismal font we are born into Jesus Christ as a new creation. A seal is set upon us on that day that changes us forever. Sometimes people will look up to us, and others will see us like clowns there for an amusement. I have a close connection to the work of Antoine Watteau and his painting “Pierrot,” who is the forever sad clown who tries his best but is always coming up short. A copy of this painting is in the sanctuary today for all of us to consider. Notice his facial expression that seems to be resigned to his fate. See that he stands before the other characters in the painting while they, and us, look on. What stands before us is another illustration of what it is to stand up for what we believe and not care what other people do to us. Whenever we feel out of place for who we are in Christ, we stand like this clown before all to see. Unlike Perrot, however, we are not doomed to always coming up short. Just as God took care of the young men, so God will take care
of us, remembering that God remains faithful even if it looks to the world that they had won. We may not be at a time where we are martyred for our faith, although that time may come, but we still suffer those little “deaths” that sting just as much when we are rejected and hated for our beliefs.

God’s grace is able to take hold of our lives and give us courage in hard times. If we cooperate with this grace, then good will come of it. While people do not physically see this mark on our souls, they should visibly see the works that flow from the grace working within us. Just as the mysterious figure was with the three young men, so the unseen reality of God by our side is working as well. As St. Paul reminds us, “For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life (2 Cor. 2:15-16).” Our very selves should cause a reaction to those around us. People will either love us or hate us because of who we are in Christ. So be prepared, for we do not know when we will be subject to the test, but do not be afraid! Through faith, hope, and love we will be the catalyst that changes the hearts of those who look in our direction. We must suffer well and follow Jesus to the cross.

In the furnace, the three young men praised God. The way to suffer and respond to persecution is it to praise God in our present affliction. “More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produced endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope. And hope does not disappoint us…” (Rm. 5:3-5).” As we stand as a spectacle for all to see, people will take note of what we do in response. To run away, to curse our opponent, to give up our beliefs, is to lose the war in the
salvation of souls. King Nebuchadnezzar saw the three men praise God and a fourth came into their midst. The fire did not consume them, but rather by the grace of God they consumed all the hate, evil, pain, and suffering. Jesus gives us that grace to follow in their footsteps, promising us that he will not leave us alone. Many of us may not be brought before the kings of this earth, but we will be brought before our neighbors, co-workers, and our family members who are going to cast us into the furnaces of their reproaches, doubt, and stubbornness. Standing up before them may be the event that brings them to a relationship to God, as King Nebuchadnezzar claimed in the end that there is no other god greater than the God of Israel. We all have put on Jesus, we have his smell about us, and this will evoke a response in people. When we are put to the test, let us stand strong. Our commission is to bring all the nations to Jesus. Consider the question, “Do you work for Jesus?” The answer better be, “Yes! I work everywhere!”
Conclusion

This thesis has attempted to demonstrate that the use of stories in preaching, born out of an experience that touches the Divine, can enhance the meaning of scripture for a listening congregation bringing them closer to God. The human story of the preacher is a layer on top of the biblical text that allows access for the listener, who in turn becomes an active participant, uniting their own similar experiences in conjunction with the highlighted story and message proclaimed by the priest. The Holy Spirit is the active agent in this process, and this becomes a shared experience. This thesis was also an attempt at demonstrating that my homily preparation and my artistic praxis are like one another when done in the service of God. Both the finalized homily and the completed art series created for this thesis are adaptations of what I have experienced when feeling like the three young men in the fiery furnace from the book of Daniel. The visual representation of this is the painting “Pierrot,” by Antoine Watteau in which I perceived a representation of the three young men in the main character Pierrot. The series of assemblages show the way the layering of images, in this case the multiple cut-outs stacked upon one another for each individual piece, act as a metaphor in the way that stories function superimposed over the biblical text. As certain details are removed, and others fortified, a clearer message is revealed.

As a priest, there is nothing more intimidating than to wake up on a Saturday morning unprepared for the first Mass of the weekend set to begin in a few hours. Not for lack of effort have I been in this situation, and when this situation arises, it is a temptation to spin stories to simply keep people’s interest or to get their praise. I am constantly checking
myself to see whether or not there is any substance to what I preach. I pray every day of the week for inspiration, study the text, read commentaries, and even listen to other preacher’s homilies in order to be prepared. Yet, I must wait for God to intervene and place myself in a receptive posture. There is nothing I can do to escape from this crucible of waiting. Yet time and again, in the silence of the chapel, or over the first cup of coffee, and even sometimes in the shower, God speaks to my heart about what it is that the people need to hear. Strangely enough, it is most often something I need to hear as well. I know this is true when I feel the fire of the Holy Spirit well up in my inner most being. I often end up preaching to myself, reminding myself of the wonders and miracles wrought by God in my life, and from there a story from my life emerges that speaks to a truth from the Gospel. I share that story, not to be entertaining, but rather to magnify the word that God is communicating to me. I teach from it as others listen and apply similar stories from their own lives to the message. We experience, encounter, and grow in our understanding of God and the mysteries contained within the Gospel. We then offer this truth and our lives back to God as we partake in the Eucharist and are united to the one story of God. We become one with God in Word and in Sacrament. We become the fire. This happens when we make ourselves vulnerable and accessible to God’s grace and power. Polished lectures, although smart and organized, are more for the classroom than for the pulpit. It is in art, born out of the cleansing fire of God, that we together sing this song back to our Creator. Anything less becomes a classroom exercise.

As I prayerfully created an artistic series for this thesis, I also investigated whether or not the artistic process, along with the finished product, had any connection to the
creation of a homily. I also wanted to explore whether it acted as a metaphor for how stories, layered over scripture, can serve to enhance the message of the Gospel rather than to hinder it. As I started to create this new work, I realized that every circumstance of my life has influenced what eventually became this series of assemblages. Born mostly of a desire to understand, I visually worked out what was happening inside both my heart and mind. As I searched for meaning while creating, the answers began to form themselves as I scrapped certain concepts and embraced others. The answers only revealed themselves when the work was completed, illustrating the point that a process is required in order to reveal the conveyed message. All of this required time for curiosity, but also the vulnerability of opening my heart to pain and sacrifice in order to find the ultimate expression. “Pierrot” was the structure in which each particular message revealed itself as every new layer was added. Each one was saying something different, yet all were born from the same image. All the while, I kept in the back of my mind that there is going to be a viewer who becomes a part of the work, bringing with them a set of life values and experiences as they ponder it. The artist’s task is the explanation of the lessons learned in visual form born out of what can at times be the experience of pain and the repetitious action of communication. Every new detail, including the context and artist of the original work, added to the unfolding of the meaning. Most importantly, the very structure on which everything was built is the story of the three young men in the fiery furnace. Even though there is not an obvious visual reference from the book of Daniel in the creation of my art, the very core of the art’s meaning starts with being in the furnace. Pierrot is each one of these men. Each new layer in the piece synthesized my
interior response to become the image of what I felt when I first experienced the painting “Pierrot” and connected it to the suffering of persecution for the sake of God. I offered back to God the visual truth I learned and shared it with others in order for it to become “ours” and not only “mine.”

I have recently given a presentation of all my art, including the art created for this thesis, to my current congregation. Many of my parishioners were eager to see the work their pastor makes, as I have not shown much of it until this point. They were pleasantly surprised and finally understood why I could not explain it in a casual conversation right after Mass. I believed they saw the depth of the work and they took their time pondering the meanings. One person asked, “Do you see differently than the rest of us?” I explained that we all see things from certain angles and different lenses, since we all bring our own unique experiences to everything we view. Some of us look with a mother’s eye, from an elderly’s perspective, from the angle of a poor person, or from someone who is ready to start something new. I try to bring the perspective from the Divine, as a priest being a mediator between heaven and earth. I try to do this with my homilies every day, but also believe I can do it with my art as well.

I am certain now that the creative process of sermonic preparation and the artist endeavor of a series of works can be one in the same. Both involve reaching deep within the soul, searching for a truth experienced, and communicating it in a way that the listener and viewer can, not only understand, but experience by relating it to their own lives. If born out of truth and applied in a correct manner, a story has its value in illuminating the truth of the Gospel message. Much like different layers added in an
original work of art, it highlights the lesson already learned but discovered in a new way. This is the work of the Holy Spirit who enables us to sing our praises back to God. Much like the three young men in the fiery furnace who offered themselves as a perfect sacrifice, God did not allow them to be overcome but rather was manifested to create the stage in which their song became a sacrifice more pleasing. It allows for others to join in and become part of one chorus of jubilation. These are the many brightly colored layers that communicate the truth. These are our stories we offer back to God and to one another. It first seemed like we add our stories to the one story of God. On closer inspection however, we do not simply add to the story of God, as if we were something separate. Our stories are already one with God, if only we have eyes to see.
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Figure 2. Fr. Craig, *Belteshazzar in Paris*, 2011, Graphite on paper, 6.5 x 4 in.
Figure 3. Fr. Craig, *Doubt*, Mixed media on canvas, 2009, 60 x 46 x 9 in.
Figure 4. Caravaggio, *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*, 1603, Oil on canvas, 42 x 57 in. Commons.wikimedia.org
Figure 5. Fr. Craig, *Hope*, 2010, Oil on canvas, approx. 70 x 50 in.
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